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Monday, February 01, 2010

Abstinence Education Effective; Comprehensive Sex Ed a Big Flop [Robert Rector]

A new study released today, shows that abstinence education is highly effective in reducing sexual activity among youth. It also showed "safe sex" and "comprehensive" sex ed programs to be ineffective.

Students participating in an eight-hour abstinence program showed a one-third decrease in rates of sexual activity compared to non-participants. This decrease persisted a full two years after they attended the class.

By contrast, safe sex (promoting only contraceptive use) and comprehensive sex ed (teaching both abstinence and contraceptive use) programs didn't affect youth behavior at all. Students in these programs showed no reduction in sexual activity and no increase in contraceptive use, in either the short or long term.

The study, involving black middle-school students, appears in the February 2010 *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, published by the American Medical Association. Employing state-of-the-art evaluation techniques, the study used random assignment to place students into four groups: a group that received instruction solely in abstinence; a safe-sex group instructed in contraceptive use; a comprehensive, or mixed message, group taught both abstinence and contraceptive use; and a control group that received health education unrelated to sex.

The abstinence program proved very effective in delaying the onset of sexual activity. Students in this program were one third less likely to initiate sexual activity when compared to students in the other three groups. And if these same students did become sexually active, they were not less likely to use contraceptives than other students. By contrast, safe sex and comprehensive sex-ed classes had no effect on student behavior; students in these classes did not reduce sexual activity nor increase contraceptive use when compared to the control group.

This study, conducted by Drs. John and Loretta Jemmott of the University of Pennsylvania, joins a long list of evaluations demonstrating the effectiveness of abstinence education. Prior to the current study, there had been 15 scientific evaluations of abstinence education, 11 of which had shown that abstinence programs were effective in reducing sexual activity. (See this [2008 Heritage paper](#) for a review of these earlier studies.) However, the new Jemmott study is the first evaluation showing positive results which employed full random assignment. As a result, it cannot be dismissed on methodological grounds.

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— Robert Rector is senior research fellow at the [Heritage Foundation](#).

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